HOW I CAUGHT AN ILLEGAL RUSSIAN SPY

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On September 15, 2018, a young woman boarded a flight from her home in Naples, Italy, to Moscow. At the time, nobody took much notice. She was a jewelry designer and a Peruvian socialite known to travel all the time for work all around the world. Nothing about it seemed out of the ordinary until she never came back. The woman known in Naples as Maria Adela Kufheldt Rivera completely vanished. She never returned to move out of her apartment, never said goodbye, stopped replying to her friend's messages, left just a cryptic post on Facebook implying that she was going in for long treatment, and might be back in touch one day. But she never did. All traces of her vanished after her flight to Moscow, except she took one important thing with her. In the words of somebody who considered her a close friend, the only thing that she ever felt attached to her cat, and it's exactly thanks to her cat, Louisa, that we managed to find her, Maria Adela, years later, living in Russia under her true identity. All along, for more than a decade, she had been a Russian spy. Hi, I'm Christo Grozev, an investigative journalist. I focus on exposing Russian spies and intelligence operations. Over the past year, we've told you about GRU's Unit 29155, a sabotage and assassination unit of Russia's military intelligence. The operatives involved in these operations are what we would call short-term illegal spies. They leave Russia

under fake identities to carry out assassinations, poisonings, or other acts of sabotage and then return home weeks or sometimes days later. But today, I'm going to talk about a different type of spy, one that doesn't operate under the same timeline. Welcome to our new series on my team's investigations into deep-cover Russian illegals. Illegal spies live abroad for years, sometimes decades, embedding themselves in foreign societies, learning the language and the cultural idiosyncrasies, and working menial or sometimes fancy jobs. They live under entirely fake identities. Their pasts are 100% fabricated, including their nationality, family history, educational and career background. All of it is thoughtfully crafted by Russian intelligence to help the illegal infiltrate the right groups in the West, and maintain their cover identity for years or even decades after that. If this sounds a lot like the setup of the TV show "The Americans," famously featuring a family of Russian spies embedding themselves in American suburbia in the late 80s, you'd be very right. That's exactly what it is. And it's a real thing. It's the Soviet and now the Russian illegal spy program. Illegal spies differ from traditional spies in a few key ways. Unlike what are called legal spies who are sent overseas as diplomats, military attaches, or other official government positions, illegal spies intentionally try to hide any connections to

the Russian government or even to Russia. As a result, they have no diplomatic cover if they are discovered or arrested. Over the years, we've uncovered more than a dozen of these deep-cover illegals. Some of those were even part of the recent prisoner swap between Russia and the West last year. Our investigations have revealed complicated characters and subplots that sometimes verge on the absurd. This is definitely one of those. The investigation into Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera, the cat lady, as we call her, began unintentionally in September of 2018. Earlier that day, my team at Bellingcat at the time, alongside our partners at The Insider, had published a different investigation. Months earlier that year, former Russian spy Sergei Skripal had been poisoned in Salisbury, England. We had discovered that the Russian operatives within the GRU, Russia's version of the CIA, had been issued passports with nearly consecutive numbers. This finding was a huge breakthrough moment for our team. Not only was it completely absurd, we just couldn't believe that an oversight in tradecraft of this magnitude would ever be made, but it was also the gift that kept on giving. It didn't just help us with the Skripal investigation. We found a third member of the poisoning team thanks to that. But it allowed us to identify a whole range of passport numbers that we could credibly suspect of being Russian

intelligence operatives. For the GRU, this discovery was obviously a disaster. As soon as we discovered numbers we suspected of belonging to Russian spies, dozens of active spies around the world were burnt overnight. Many of them were under deep cover throughout Europe. After spending years or even decades living under fake identities. The cat lady was one of these spies. I remember the day I stumbled upon this name for the first time. I had just received access to a leaked data set of Belarusian border crossings and I was eager to find if any Russian spies, using passports from the now known range, had crossed the border of this country that sits between Russia and Western Europe. There was one name that stood out, a beautiful foreign Spanish-sounding name, Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera. It didn't make sense for a foreigner to have a Russian passport only a few digits away from known GRU operatives. Now, why would the person with that name, traveling repeatedly by train from Moscow to Rome and back, as we could see from the database, use a passport issued by Russia's GRU? Why did she even have a Russian passport to begin with? Why would she travel back and forth between Italy and Russia dozens of times in the period 2010 to 2018? And crucially, why did she fly back to Moscow the day after our investigation was released? And why was she never returning back from Russia after

that? We started by scouring everything that we could online for any information we could find about her. Fortunately, the internet was flushed with pretty pictures, videos, and social media posts. All of these helped us build an idea of her life in Naples, the people she hung out with, the clubs she was part of, the jewelry business that she claimed she was running. We decided to reach out to a few of her friends to see what they could tell us about this woman who seemingly vanished overnight. Her origin story went as follows. Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera was born in Callao, Peru, to a German father and a Peruvian mother on September the 1st, 1978. The story she would tell her friends in Naples was quite exotic. Her father abandoned her mother when she was just a baby, with her mother left to raise Maria on her own. Then, in 1980, her mother supposedly took baby Maria to Moscow, of all places, to watch the Olympic Games, which were happening there. When she received an emergency message from Peru requiring her to return home immediately. Her mother left little baby Maria in the care of a Soviet family that she had apparently befriended during her visit. And then she never returned. Maria was then raised by these adoptive parents in Russia and was later abused by her adoptive father. That's the story she was telling everybody. Does any of this sound fishy yet? Not the best origin cover

story or "legend" as they are called in Russian intelligence jargon. The reason for this sloppy, implausible story was that it had to be invented on the fly or retrofitted to fit the unexpected circumstances that this spy had landed in. You see, Soviet and later Russian illegal spies are usually deployed with impeccably crafted backstories, "legends," and valid passports issued by the country that they purport to originate from. To do this, a whole service department exists in Moscow with branches at many Russian embassies around the world whose only job is to hunt for opportunities to create these fake identities. Sometimes, based on forged original birth certificates, at other times, based on stolen identities of deceased people. This had been the case with Maria Rivera's backstory, initially. A forged birth certificate issued by a parish church in a small Peruvian village had been used to get the Russians by an authentic Peruvian passport in 2005. However, just a few months after she had been successfully deployed as a young, attractive Peruvian globe-trotter to Malta, the unthinkable happened. A civil officer overseeing this case in Lima, Peru, thought something was fishy about this newly issued citizen passport. The officer reached out to the parish priest at the Cristo Liberador Dioceses and the actual priest responded. It didn't take long for the reverend to know that this was all a fake. After all, he was

the founder of that church and the inaugural priest. It had been established, and that's where the problem lay, 9 years after Maria's documents, the birth certificate said was issued there. Unsurprisingly, he reported back to Lima that the documents were clearly fake, and her name, Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera, was even included in an "annulled citizenship" list in the annual report of the Peruvian migration department, available even to download on the internet. In circumstances like this, the Russian illegals machine would just recall the spy back to Moscow and start fresh after a few months or a year under a new identity. However, in this case, our Maria Adela had already been deployed initially in Malta and then in Italy and had begun building a promising circle of contacts. She was dating an eligible bachelor, the son of a Malta rich family. And she had befriended people with important contacts in politics, business, and the media. It made no sense to kill all of this and start a fresh. So Moscow Center decided to take a huge gamble. They kept Maria Adela deployed in the field but gave her emergency Russian papers, a Russian passport, from the then unknown GRU range. And to fit that passport, they had to retrofit her backstory. Thus, the implausible Moscow Olympics trip. And even more implausibly, that crazy story held up among her new friends, and no one seemed to question the bona fides of this woman.

Apparently, the looks and charisma that went with her went a long way to make up for the GRU operational deficiencies. But we still didn't understand why or what she had been doing all this time, initially in Malta and then in Italy, as her social media post showed to us. By 2018, she had lived in Europe for over a decade, known to her friends as a Peruvian jewelry maker. Using social media posts, travel records, and flight data attached to the newly uncovered passport, we began piecing together her movements from 2009 to 2018. Between 09 and 12, she appeared in Malta, Rome, Paris, and in London. She had infiltrated numerous different expatriate circles in these countries. She had a rich boyfriend in Malta, later another rich one in Italy. She took trips to Africa and the Middle East to attend many jewelry expos. But more interesting than these travels was her base in Naples, Italy, that really drew our attention. See, Naples is home to NATO's Joint Forces Command Center. It is a major operational headquarters for the alliance, which makes it the ideal place for a Russian spy posing as a socialite to live. Maria opened her jewelry business here in 2013, first establishing herself in the community. Later, she helped relaunch and became the secretary of a local charity organization, which had been launched by a NATO officer earlier, called the Lions Club. Through the Lions Club, Maria began to

develop friendships with other members, including the wives of important NATO colonels and generals. It was also reportedly a good place for her to seed romantic relationships with people that were close to NATO circles or even within NATO itself. These relationships granted her access to untold NATO secrets without arousing suspicion. Unlike what you might expect from a highly trained spy, however, Maria Adela was also known to be very emotionally unpredictable. These ups and downs and frequent heartbreaks that she talked about likely complicated her operational consistency. From a professional sense, however, her jewelry brand did offer her the perfect cover story. We began investigating "Serein," her company, first using social media posts. She marketed herself as an artisan boutique jewelry designer. She traveled all the time to meet with important partners and buyers, giving the impression of a sophisticated and busy businesswoman. However, like most things in her life, that wasn't exactly what it seemed like. When we reverse image searched the photos of her jewelry, the jewelry that she supposedly designed herself in Naples, we discovered that they were actually cheap trinkets purchasable online from Chinese websites and wholesalers. This was an exciting discovery for us because it was yet another proof that Maria Adela was living a lie. But those around her in Naples didn't

realize this. She was even invited to host grand openings for her storefront, named the “Serein concept gallery," inviting friends from all over to come celebrate. A promo video for the venue that we found online markets it as a haven for the high-rolling public, including local politicians, businessmen, and celebrities. She was even interviewed for an Italian TV channel at the time. Again, that's a great way to get close to powerful contacts that might be useful to Russia. The jewelry brand also provided Maria with a useful excuse for travel and for building relationships elsewhere. For example, Maria visited Bahrain multiple times after 2013 under the pretext of attending the annual Jewelllery Arabia Expo. She seemed to have made good contacts in the country, as in December 2014, she posted a photo on Serrain's company Facebook page of her gifting cufflinks to the country's prime minister at the time, Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa. As I mentioned earlier, the Lions Club charity was also a key way that Maria was building an important relationship circle. She was so committed that she eventually became the secretary of that local chapter. According to a German Bundeswehr officer who was treasurer of the Lions Club branch in 2015, the club's membership had begun waning before Maria joined. An executive from the biggest Lions Club in Naples recommended Maria Adela as a way to invigorate

momentum. He said she's very enthusiastic. She will bring people back. He recalls that Maria Adela was very active in trying to revitalize the club, attending all the events. And at one point in 2018, as membership began declining again and the prospect of club closure reemerged, she even volunteered to pay herself for everybody's membership fee. This gesture actually directly aligns with a technique used by spies to gather profiling intelligence. For example, identifying people with financial difficulties could mean finding targets potentially susceptible for external influence and who may be vulnerable to recruitment or blackmail. This would be seen as a valuable intelligence for the illegal spy to pass on to other operatives who would then take more actionable initiatives with that information. Then on September 15, 2018, one day after our article exposing the Salisbury poisoners and the GRU passport range was published, Maria purchased a one-way ticket to Moscow. In the blink of an eye, she left her jewelry boutique, friendships, and nearly all of her personal possessions behind without saying goodbye to anyone. Then, 2 months after her sudden departure, Maria made one final cryptic Facebook post. She claimed that she had been suffering from cancer and revealed that her hair had just grown back after chemotherapy. This appears to be an attempt to explain her disappearance

without offering any verifiable information. Now, her GRU passport number, the unlikely details of her childhood, and her fake jewelry business being stationed at NATO headquarters convinced us that Maria was a GRU illegal spy already. But as in many of our investigations into illegals, the final piece of evidence we needed was to confirm not who she wasn't, Maria Adela, but who she really was, identifying her Russian real identity. However, uncovering Maria's real identity ended up being a frustrating months-long challenge for us. Initial searches for any thread that would connect Maria to life in Russia were fruitless. We didn't really have a place to start because we couldn't find a single true detail to search around. Her name, birthday, and career were completely fake. Searching for her face in Russian passport databases yielded hundreds of possible matches with very low match probabilities. No public sightings or social media profiles with her face popped up anywhere in Russia. It was a deafening digital silence after her disappearance from Italy. Then I remembered how often sources in Naples consistently described one thing about Maria, her intense attachment to her cat, Louisa. In fact, many people described the cat as the only stable thing in Maria's life. So maybe, just maybe, this was the one true thing about Maria. I hypothesized that she may have brought Louisa the cat back to Moscow

after she fled. And maybe finding Louisa the cat was going to be easier than finding Maria the spy. For months, we started looking for any potential linkage between that cat in Naples and a matching cat in Moscow. We searched for cats named Louisa mentioned in Russian social media sites. We tried to find a database of Russian domestic pets listed by name. No such existed, unfortunately. We even tried to do reverse face searching using Louisa the cat's face, mostly as a joke, but with a secret hope that it might provide a match in Russia. None of that produced any meaningful results, of course. But then we realized that every cat that travels from the EU to Russia must have one thing: a uniquely numbered microchip implanted in order to identify the cat. Otherwise, they can't get on the plane, cross the border. It's all linked to vaccinations, immunizations, and so on and so forth. And this was our first breakthrough. We were eventually able to locate the microchip number for Louisa, the Italian cat, asking for a favor from an Austrian police officer who had a colleague in Italian police. I had to explain that cats are not people and thus they are not subject to protection from privacy laws. This argument surprisingly worked. And after a few months of digging, I got the reply to my "pet project," the microchip number. At this point in the investigation, we needed to use every shred of digital evidence we had to find who

the real person behind Maria Adela is. One thing we did is obtain a Russian phone number in the name of Maria Adela that was used when she was booking flights inside Russia. We were able to obtain the call records of that number from the Russian black market for data. And while she didn't make any meaningful phone calls in Russia, she was using it mostly for internet. We saw that there were incoming spam phone calls from a particular region in Russia, from Krasnodar. That's in the south of Russia. Now, what is interesting is that spam calls in Russia work in a particular way. When the owner of a phone number shows up in a new region in roaming, they start getting calls from spam numbers in that region. This meant that the owner of the phone had shown up at least once in Krasnodar. And then I remembered that in an Instagram posting of Maria Adela, we had found a comment in Russian and that happened to be from a woman from Krasnodar, from actually a town in Krasnodar called Anapa. And these were two data points connecting the person behind Maria Adela to a particular region in Russia. But then the stroke of luck was when we were able to obtain an old searchable database of Russian passports from before 2006. And this meant that that was before the GRU would have scrubbed any data about Maria Adela or the real person behind the real Maria Adela from databases.

We did a reverse face search with the photo of Maria Adela, and we found several faces that may or may not have been the real person behind Maria Adela, but one of them was connected to Krasnodar. And this was a young woman in a black and white photo who resembled a younger version of Maria Adela, and her name was Olga Kolobova. Now the photo as you can see is of a much younger person and although she resembled Maria Adela we could not be sure, and in fact my colleagues were saying this may be a different person. And then I sent this same photo to close friends of Maria Adela, who had befriended her in Western Europe, and the reaction was unambiguous: that's 100% Maria Adela, which meant Maria Adela was none other than Olga Kolobova. Now we were completely convinced by this point that we had found the real Maria Adela, and that was Olga Kolobova. But that was not enough for us to publish an article. We needed to prove it beyond any doubt, and that meant finding a current photo of Olga Kolobova that matches the person that we see as Maria Adela. We managed to find Olga Kolobova's OK account. OK is something like Facebook in Russia. It was linked to her mobile number, and that's how we found it. Although there were no photos of Olga herself, they were telling signs. She, for example, followed a group called Four Paws. It was a veterinary clinic, clearly a cat

lover. She posted photos of flower bouquets mirroring the same aesthetic as Maria Adela's Instagram, where there were a lot of photos in the same style. And she shared a photo of a Mediterranean beach, and she asked her friends to guess where that had been. Well, we knew where that was. That was Italy. Leaked car registration databases showed that the person called Olga Kolobova had bought an Audi A3 in 2020. And guess what? Maria Adela was also known to have loved the Audi brand. She had posted a picture of herself behind the wheel of an Audi on Instagram. All of these were great telling signs that we found the real person, but we needed a photo. And then an idea popped up in my mind. And this is when I turned to an app that I had never imagined I would find helpful in an investigation of illegal spies: Tinder. In Olga Kolobova's call records, we noticed that she had received a confirmation code from Tinder, which revealed to us that she must have a Tinder account. I also knew that Tinder usually works off the location where you are based to serve up romantic partner candidates that may be in your near vicinity. So, I created my first-ever Tinder account. I used a fake Russian name and fake photos. Sorry to all the men whose physiques I briefly borrowed. And I placed my location within 1 kilometer radius of Olga Kolobova's apartment using GPS spoofing. And I started swiping and swiping and swiping.

And about 3 days later, I found it. A woman named Olga who had the exact same photo on her Tinder profile that Maria Adela had on her social media page before. This was the nail in the coffin. We finally had the photo not only similar between the two, but literally the same photo connecting the two identities. Maria Adela was definitely Olga Kolobova. After confirming this, thanks to some Russian hackers, we got access to several of Olga's dating profiles and accounts. We could see that she spent significant time swiping, chatting, and setting up dates, sometimes two on the same day. We also discovered, thanks to these photos, that she did most of these postings from a desk at work because she had a habit of sending photos of her legs to the men that she was chatting with. These photos also revealed her office location, the workspace, and full computer screens showing that she worked at the Russian pension fund office in Moscow. This was confirmed by her food delivery apps, that showed that she was receiving deliveries for lunch to the office address of the pension fund. So for any of you who are wondering what burned Russian spies go on to do, it sounds pretty bleak and boring. They work at the pension fund as accountants. Using old regional business databases, we were eventually able to trace Olga's previous Russian digital presence to 2005 when at the age of 23 she had

registered the company selling alcohol in Russia's Krasnodar region. This discovery gave us her old registered address, and that enabled us, in turn, to track down her father. We found that he headed the military department at a big university, the Urals University, and he had been decorated with military honors and medals because of his international duty in the republics of Iraq, Angola, and Syria. Apparently, Olga Koloba was a second-generation GRU officer. So, we had been able to prove the identity of Maria Adela as Olga Kolobova using ultimately Tinder. But that wasn't satisfactory enough because I had spent so many months tracing Louisa the cat. We had obtained the microchip number from Italy. And fortunately for us, in the beginning of 2022, Russia introduced a system of voluntary registration of pets, household animals called "Animal ID." And we were able to get access to that system. And guess what? The microchip number, the Italian-issued chip number in the name of the cat Louisa, was linked to an owner whose name was O. Kolobova . And there you go. The role of the cat was finally confirmed. We could officially confirm that Maria and Olga were the same person and were a Russian spy. And we were able to unmask her because of the very human attributes that spies have. Firstly, her love for cats, and secondly, her search for love. These are the kinds of things that expose most illegals in the end.

We were also able to later find a recent high-quality photo of Olga Kolobova's driver's license, taken in 2021. A comparison of the photos yielded a very, very high convincing match, proving one more time, as if we needed it, that the Peruvian illegal Maria Adela Kuhfeldt Rivera was actually GRU operative Olga Kolobova. Olga's case introduced us to the new generation of Russian illegals. Individuals deployed young, trained quickly, and reliant on their natural charm and improvisation. Their fake identities weren't just covers. They were their realities, and the information that they collected was deeply consequential. I'm not sure we will ever know exactly what Olga gathered during her time in Naples and passed on to her superiors within the GRU. But that's part of what makes illegal so dangerous. Since uncovering Maria's true identity, we've also uncovered a number of other illegal Russian spies. And we're not done. If you enjoy these kind of investigations, make sure you sign up for The Christo Files. Subscribe to our channel because then you'll stay up to date with our future installments in the "Illegals" program that we are describing. Trust me, some of the future stories are even crazier than this one. And if you want to find out more about Russian secret operations, maybe you should watch our existing series on Unit 29155. In any case, subscribe and stay tuned.